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ABSTRACT

The consultant function has great potential for creating positive and worthwhile changes in the reading program. The degree of success attained will be determined by the clarity with which the role is defined and responsibilities delineated, an understanding of the interrelationships between consultant responsibilities and those of other professionals involved in the reading program, the personal qualities of the consultant, and his professional commitment to the improvement of reading instruction. (LL)

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SYMPOSIUM

THE ROLES OF ADMINISTRATORS, CONSULTANTS AND CLINICIANS IN A SYSTEM-WIDE READING PROGRAM

WEDNESDAY, MAY 14, 2:00 - 4:45 p.m.

20TH ANNUAL CONVENTION
NEW YORK CITY

CS001835

THE ROLE OF THE CONSULTANT

The broadened scope of reading instruction and expressions of concern (from both the teaching profession and the general public) about pupils' reading performance are among the factors which led to the development of the position of Reading Consultant. During the 1960's and 1970's infusions of government funds into reading projects provided opportunities for school systems to obtain or to increase specialist staff in reading. These additional funds also allowed school systems to obtain the services of consultants from outside the system as part of short-term in-service or special project offerings.

Through such efforts it was commonly believed that there would be an obvious improvement in the quality of reading instruction, and, consequently, improvement in children's reading performance. However, such positive developments did not always occur. As a result, there were questions raised about the value of the consultant service. In short, it was not readily apparent that the consultant service provided the kind of impact that was desired for program change.

Today, faced with budget restrictions, some school systems are formally re-assessing the consultant role. (This applies to other curricular areas in addition to reading.) In some instances, this re-consideration has had some rather dramatic results. The hiring of additional consultant staff has been frozen in some school

jurisdictions, while in others the consultant positions have been eliminated.

Such drastic decisions can only compound problems already existing in a system's reading program. The nature of these problems will be obvious to any of you who have been involved in the development of school reading programs.

Administrative moves of this nature and administrative evaluations which cast unfavourable reflections on the consultant role should provoke us as professionals committed to the improvement of the reading program to raise some vital questions. (I do not view these questions merely as a stance to justify our own positions or to protect our territorial prerogatives in reading. On the contrary, I think it is essential that those of us involved in the consultant role critically assess the definition of the role and the responsibilities associated with it)

Some questions which merit consideration are:

(1) Why does the consultant service often not achieve desired changes in the reading program?

(2) What specific responsibilities can be defined for reading consultants?

(3) What are effective techniques reading consultants can use to carry out their responsibilities?

Lack of a clear-cut definition of the reading consultant role may be one reason why services have not been effective. In general terms, the reading consultant may be viewed as one who

> works directly with teachers, administrators, and other professionals to develop and implement the reading program under the direction of a supervisor with special training in reading. (1)

Such a global description implies that the reading consultant must be all things to all people! A consultant operating within this definition might be expected to perform the following variety of tasks: conduct formal and informal evaluations of the reading program; observe and assist teachers encountering difficulties with their reading program; select instructional materials; serve on various central office committees concerned with reading; assess certain pupils' reading needs; meet with parent groups to explain the reading program--across several grade levels and in anywhere from 20 to 120 schools. To do so many tasks effectively becomes impossible! As a result, many consultants retreat to comfortable pastimes rather than focussing on constructive activities.

There is a need to specify the aspects of the reading program which will be the responsibility of a particular consultant. For example, in an urban school system the consultant duties might be differentiated along these lines: (I am assuming that a consultant has responsibility for a limited number of schools in a specified geographic areas.)

(1) consultants who work directly in the developmental reading program at each of the administrative levels used in the system (e.g., elementary, middle school, secondary).

(2) consultants who work directly with the corrective reading teachers (usually administrative levels 3 - 8).

(3) consultants who operate across curricular boundaries to facilitate the application of reading skills in the content fields (administrative levels 5 - 12).

These individuals could be part of a central Reading Department; however, it is essential that their main base of operations be the geographic areas to which they are assigned.

These definitions of consultant roles should allow the consultant to do some in-depth work within an identified priority area of the reading program. They should also serve to clarify the sources of authority for changes in the reading program. Hopefully, the results will be strengthened reading programs and improved pupil performance.

Another factor which may inhibit the success of the consultant service is failure to determine the authority associated with the consultant function. Oftentimes, the consultant will make suggestions for program modification; however, if there is an "authority-vacuum" the changes may never materialize. Although the reading consultant may be working "under the direction of a supervisor with special training in reading," (2) the consultant should have the authority to make decisions about the reading program within his sphere of operations. This means that relationships with school administrators, classroom teachers, and other reading personnel must be carefully considered, so that all concerned with the development of the reading program know who carries

the decision-making responsibilities.

A third factor which may affect the quality of consultant services is the term of the consultant appointment. Many systems favour two year terms for consultants, with the candidates being drawn from the system's teaching force and returning to it upon completion of the consultant term. While there are justifications for short-term appointments, some of the related problems outweigh the advantages. With frequent staff turnover at the consultant level, continuity in program development for both staff and students may be adverse y affected. An added problem arises when consultants with opposing philosophical positions are required to follow through in program development.

These three factors--lack of a clear-cut definition of the consultant role, failure to designate authority, and the term of appointment--may be instrumental in determining the value of the consultant service in achieving desired changes in the reading program. As reading professionals, we must assume the responsibility for clarification of such factors in our own school systems.

Let us turn now to the second question which was posed: "What specific responsibilities can be defined for reading consultants?" This discussion will focus on the broad areas of program evaluation, implementation, and continuity. Although the discussion of responsibilities in each of these areas will be in general terms, all of the points have application to the

three consultant areas defined earlier. The consultant must be prepared to select those responsibilities which are most significant for the context in which he is operating.

The consultant's background of experience, his advanced professional training (which should include course work in public relations and curriculum development as well as reading), and his objective position within the instructional context will provide the basis for offering guidance to school administrators and teachers for the total development of the reading program.

Changes in existing programs and innovations to accommodate new needs cannot be done without some appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Consequently, program assessment must be conducted. Although the consultant may not be the person responsible for the administration of formal and informal evaluations, he should play a major role in the following aspects of program evaluation:

(1) dissemination of information about the uses and abuses of standardized tests, criterion-referenced tests, and informal reading inventories;

(2) judgment of the facets of the reading program which should have priority for modification;

(3) interpretation of the information collected from assessments and evaluations.

Once information has been gathered about the program, decisions can be made about the kinds of changes needed and ways

in which to implement these changes. In this context, the reading consultant should:

(1) provide direction in the establishment and implementation of the goals of the reading program;

(2) act as the guiding force in the implementation of judicious innovations;

(3) identify in-service training needs to accommodate the new demands placed on teachers by the program modifications, and to supplement the pre-service training of the teachers;

(4) provide in-service sessions which extend over a period of time (as opposed to intensive, short-term sessions) and utilize a variety of strategies (direct instruction, guided observation, simulation, demonstration and application).

In-service training should serve as a link between program implementation and the continuous development of the program. Other responsibilities which the consultant should assume in ensuring effective program continuity include:

(1) establishing guidelines for the selection of instructional materials and the expenditure of school funds allocated to the reading program;

(2) assisting individual teachers in the selection of appropriate materials for different instructional purposes and different pupils;

(3) assisting teachers in the application of various teaching procedures and patterns of classroom organization;

(4) visiting classrooms and discussing with individual teachers aspects of the program which are of particular concern;

(5) circulating appropriate professional literature to staff members.

The effective reading consultant will be conversant with such duties and be able to establish the priorities of the duties in the context of his particular area of expertise.

Knowing the responsibilities is not sufficient, however. The consultant must be able to employ a variety of strategies in order to carry out the duties in a competent way. This brings us to a consideration of third question which was posed: "What are effective techniques consultants can use to carry out their responsibilities?"

The ability of the consultant to effectively meet his responsibilities will be influenced by a number of factors. Administrative support and the provision of situations which facilitate the implementation of the consultant's recommendations, availability of release time for in-service programs, and precedents established by previous members of the consultant staff will be some of the factors affecting the consultant's function.

More significant, however, may be the teachers' acceptance or rejection of the consultant on a professional basis. The teachers may feel that someone who is outside the instructional setting cannot have a full appreciation of the problems they have to contend with every day. In such situations, it is imperative that the consultant be a considerate participant and observer in the instructional setting. By meeting with teachers in the real setting, objective information can be collected. Using such information, the consultant

can demonstrate his willingness to grapple with the problems faced by the teacher. Directed observations, opportunities to reflect upon the situation and to discuss with the teacher alternative solutions should allow the consultant to achieve some degree of credibility. A combination of personal consideration and commitment to the improvement of particular aspects of the reading program should provide a substantial basis for communicating with the teacher.

The consultant must reveal himself as an independent person whose loyalties are not decidedly with school administration, central office staff, or various teachers. This is a difficult posture to maintain but the successful attainment of the consultant's varied duties depends on his ability to serve a number of people--principals, teachers, children, parents--as the need arises.

Teachers must also know that their discussions with the consultant will be treated with confidentiality. It is unfortunate that many teachers think that seeking consultant assistance is an admission of failure. Such should not be the case, and the consultant must be capable of creating a feeling of trust with the individual teachers.

The success a consultant achieves in motivating school administrators and teachers to improve reading instruction may not come easily. The consultant must be able to create an atmosphere that is conducive to changing the behaviour of the staff members.

The following suggestions are indicative of what a consultant must do in order to establish an atmosphere in which teachers feel confident to pursue suggestions for the modification of instruction:

(1) the consultant serves as a model for authenticity;

(2) he projects an image that tells the teacher he is here to build, not destroy;

(3) he conveys his expectations and confidence that the teacher can accomplish the task.

This discussion of the consultant role has stressed the need to specify responsibilities within certain areas of the reading program, and has indicated some way in which a consultant can behave in order to further his objectives related to the improvement of reading instruction.

To create an impact on existing programs and to act as a stimulator of effective innovations, the consultant cannot operate independently. His function is closely allied with that of the school administrator in reaching decisions which reflect the consultant's knowledge of what is appropriate for the reading program, and the administrator's successful implementation of a philosophy which melds staff competencies and community expectations. His job is intricately related to that of the classroom teacher. Without teacher support and ability to implement instructional changes, improvements in the reading program may not materialize. The consultant must also work in a cooperative environment with other reading specialists and subject area teachers. He must be prepared

to consider their specialist points of view as they relate to the total development of the reading program.

The consultant function has great potential for creating positive and worthwhile changes in the reading program. The degree of success attained will be determined by the clarity with which the role is defined and responsibilities delineated; an understanding of the inter-relationships between consultant responsibilities and those of other professionals involved in the reading program; the personal qualities of the consultant; and his professional commitment to the improvement of reading instruction.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Roles, Responsibilities, and Qualifications of Reading Specialists."
   Newark: International Reading Association. (brochure)

2. Ibid.